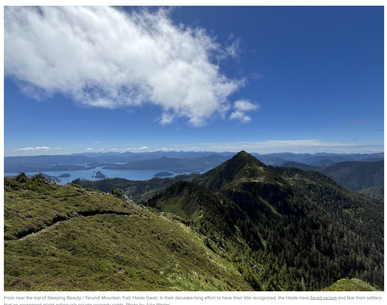
Haida Gwaii shows how to resist Conservative fearmongering on Indigenous rights

By Julia Weder, Mary Stuart & James Rowe | Opinion | September 16th 2025



From near the top of Sleeping Beauty / Tarund Mountain Trail, Haida Gwaii. In their decades-long effort to have their title recognized, the Haida have faced racism and fear from settlers that an agreement might extinguish private property rights. Photo by Julia Weder

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This has been a big year for Aboriginal title, after both the Haida title agreement and the recent BC Supreme Court Decision recognizing Quw'utsun (Cowichan) claims to land in Richmond.

Despite signs of progress, or indeed because of them, the Conservative Party of BC and right-wing movements are ramping up efforts to block any extensions of Indigenous authority. We think the case of Haida Gwaii — home to the most sweeping title agreement in Canadian history — holds vital lessons for how to push back against right-wing misinformation on Indigenous rights.

Indigenous people want to steal your land, and other ironies

In 2024, the Conservatives successfully scuttled NDP amendments to the BC Land Act that would have facilitated more land-use agreements with First Nations. At the time, Conservative Leader John Rustad wrongly claimed that the land act amendments were "an assault on your private property rights."

Conservative misinformation is supported by a whole right-wing ecosystem that has settled on the argument that any progress on reconciliation means an assault on private property rights. This is cynical fearmongering meant to delay overdue progress. BC Rising, a grassroots right-wing populist organization with ties to the Conservatives, hosted two webinars in 2024 painting the Land Act amendments as a threat to property rights. The webinars had hundreds of live online viewers and the recordings have garnered thousands of views (up to 14,000) since.

When the Haida agreement was announced, Rustad trotted out the false argument that private property on Haida Gwaii was imperilled, when in fact the agreement protects private property rights. Likewise, BC Rising spread the same misinformation in one of their webinars. Guest speaker Bruce Pardy, a law professor at Queen's University and fellow at the Fraser Institute, claimed that "individuals don't have rights" in BC and that we need a "colourblind society" that presumably extinguishes Indigenous rights.

> **Conservative misinformation is supported by a whole right-wing ecosystem that has settled on the argument that any progress on reconciliation means an assault on private property rights, write James Rowe**

The Quw'utsun (Cowichan) Ruling

Unsurprisingly, the Conservatives are using the same misformation to criticize the recent Quw'utsun (Cowichan) ruling. In a statement released after the court's decision, Rustad noted that "private property rights are the foundation of our democracy. You cannot have reconciliation by stripping away rights from one group to give them to another."

This is a remarkable statement given that Canada was literally constituted by stripping rights and land from one group to give them to another.

It is true that the Quw'utsun ruling implicates private property in ways that previous Aboriginal title decisions have not. To date, major legal decisions recognizing title in BC have focused on Crown land, which makes up 94 per cent of the provincial land base.

The BC Supreme Court's recent ruling compels the province to begin negotiations with the Quw'utsun nation over privately held lands in their territory. The ruling does not call for the return of private property, nor did the Quw'utsun ask for it, but it does require a negotiated settlement, which might involve compensation for land lost to settler ownership.

While the Quw'utsun decision requires government-to-government negotiation over disputed lands, the Haida agreement is a product of such negotiations and is the most thoroughgoing title agreement in Canadian history. If Aboriginal title is a significant threat to private property rights, wouldn't we be hearing about settler outrage on Haida Gwaii?

Over on Haida Gwaii

One of us — Julia Weder — lives as a settler on Haida Gwaii, and it has been surreal to watch fear-mongering about the title agreement spread across the province even as it is received by settler residents with relative calm and support.

Sunset in Daajing Giids, Haida Gwaii. Photo by Julia Weder

This was not always the case. In their decades-long effort to have their title recognized, the Haida have faced racism and fear from settlers that an agreement might extinguish private property rights. How have those fears been managed? Speaker events, film screenings, book talks, publications, gatherings and art shows have helped ease these worries. The Council of the Haida Nation also produced various materials (online webinars and letters mailed to residents' PO boxes) reassuring residents that fee simple land and home ownership are not affected by title negotiations.

Thanks to these efforts by Haida and settlers, the prevailing attitude towards Haida Gwaii among settler residents is one of public support for language restoration, cultural protocol and Haida title. For example, when the Village of Daajing Giids had its name restored after 130 years under its colonial moniker Queen Charlotte, many residents expressed respect for Haida presence, history and leadership, as well as a strong desire to support Haida reclamation efforts. Today, bright turquoise "Haida Title Now" posters are displayed in windows, and people are finding ways to re-imagine and experiment with what society could look like within the context of Haida sovereignty and values.

A key part of this generally solidaristic atmosphere is Haida Gwaii's rich history of alliances between Haida and settler peoples in grassroots movements — in support of Haida title and resurgence, to protect Haida Gwaii's lands and waters, to build greater food autonomy and myriad other aspects of community-building and resistance. These movements have been powerful sites of solidarity-building and culture-building between communities. And so when settlers and Indigenous people find common cause around land protection efforts elsewhere in the province, these alliances can become a resource to push back against right-wing misinformation in local communities.

What not to do

Given the governing NDP's efforts to finalize the Haida title agreement and distinguish themselves from the Conservatives on Indigenous rights, it is disappointing to watch them parrot right-wing talking points in the wake of the recent Quw'utsun decision.

Despite the continued security of private property rights in BC, NDP Attorney General Niki Sharma recently warned that the "ruling could have significant unintended consequences for fee simple private property rights in B.C. that must be reconsidered."

There is no one formula for avoiding reactionary backlash to Indigenous rights. But the NDP's decision to join hands with the Conservatives to spread fear about private property rights in the wake of the Quw'utsun decision models what not to do. Instead, settlers who support Indigenous rights need to learn from the Haida Gwaii example: public education, mailers, online content and community organizing that quells fears and communicates a positive vision of Aboriginal title.

Not only does its recognition by different levels of government begin to right historical wrongs, but it also lays the groundwork for a future of partnership and opportunity between Indigenous nations and settler Canadians — what President of the Haida Nation Gaagwiis Jason Alsop has called "a new era of peaceful co-existence."

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